

On your side

Behind every fast-growing business you'll almost always find an enthusiastic support partner. Glenn Baker looks at the many support options for business owners and discovers some great mentoring partnerships.



There's an old saying that goes 'behind every great sports team there's an equally great coach' – and the same can be said about businesses. Today there are not many people who will attempt to start-up or indeed grow a business without the support of a third party advisor. 'Who's your mentor?' has become a standard question in networking circles.

Of course, go back ten years, and that question would likely have been greeted by a blank stare or the response perhaps

'my accountant' or 'my lawyer'. Purely by default.

Since the turn of this century there has been a steady proliferation of business consultancies and coaching organisations in New Zealand – along with Government funded agencies and industry-related bodies that offer all manner of support services and training.

This is a good thing – provided you find support that's appropriate to your business, and is affordable. Unfortunately the adage 'you get what you pay for' doesn't always apply.

The options are many if you are genuinely looking for help with your business – we've listed the majority of them in a 'supporters box' on the page opposite.

To highlight how to maximise your relationship with a business supporter (aka coach, advisor, consultant, mentor), and how to make your partnership a success, we've also identified some great existing partnerships and trust these will provide that incentive to pick up the phone and seek your own support.

The right fit

Great support partnerships are all about ‘the right fit’ – as Alex Valentine, MD of Albany-based Allco Agencies, an importing and distribution company for the construction industry, points out. Valentine says he has always enjoyed a “comfortable relationship” with his business advisor, Bruce Taylor of Advantage Business Ltd, right from day one.

Valentine took over ownership of the company three years ago with another business partner, and a year later, with a view to restructure and grow the business, engaged the services of Taylor. This was despite a tight cashflow situation the company was experiencing at the time.

Two years on, with turnover up significantly and staff numbers doubled, Valentine has only good things to say about the arrangement.

“Bruce came with a great deal of business knowledge and delivered on his promises, and there has been minimal paperwork,” he says. “I like that.”

Valentine admits he drives the relationship fairly hard (he uses the term ‘maximise’) and currently consults with Bruce at least twice a week.

“Bruce is a very good filter, a great sounding board – and he knows our business. And while we may disagree on occasion, his information and help is invaluable for us when it comes to making decisions. He also

holds us accountable for our forward planning – keeps us right on track.”

The company is making more money, but Valentine says there have been additional benefits too – such as improved staff relationships. But most of all he loves the fact that Bruce is just as passionate about the business as he is. “We feed off each other. He’s part of the business.”

“Unfortunately most entrepreneurs are natural leaders but know little about management – this is where a coach or advisor can help most...”

For his part Bruce Taylor is somewhat modest about his role in Allco’s growth.

“Alex has a huge level of enthusiasm and passion for both products and staff, and this means it’s possible to achieve anything with the company,” he says. “It has been an absolute pleasure to work with him and see the transformation as we’ve worked through the programme.”

Taylor says his initial task was to assist with issues surrounding

the director’s roles, goal setting, staff motivation and organisational structure issues. This was after conducting customer and staff surveys, and a comprehensive analysis of both the company’s internal functions and external operating environment – to gain a clear understanding of ‘where things were at’.

“My biggest contribution, I believe, was being able to inject some clarity of vision – particularly with individual roles and responsibilities – helping management to operate more at a governance level and concentrate on strategic issues.”

Successful support partnerships all come back to commitment, says Taylor. “We set the overall goals of the programme with Allco – which go forward five years – but are broken down into 12 month and quarterly goals. Our twice monthly meetings are centred around the tasks that will achieve each quarterly goal. There is not a lot of theory – most of it is practical advice.”

Taylor is conscious of the fact that many business owners can feel somewhat overwhelmed by a support programme instigated by their business advisor.

“That’s why our role is to break everything down into small, manageable steps. Company owners and managers are already working up to 50 hours a week – they don’t need any added burden to cope with.”